



**“We Choose Welcome”**  
**Scripture – Luke 10:25-37**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, June 5, 2016**

There may be a photograph that your mind will not forget. What about the lifeless body of a three year-old boy in a red T-shirt lying face down on a beach in Turkey? His five year-old brother and 10 other Syrians drowned in a desperate attempt to flee their war ravaged country and reach the Greek island of Kos. Last year nearly 4,000 Syrian refugees died while trying to reach Europe – most of them drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

The Civil War in Syria has created one of the greatest humanitarian disasters since World War II. In the past five years, more than 400,000 people in Syria have been killed and two million have been wounded. Nearly five million have escaped their country – frantic to save their families. More than half of the refugees are children.

A number of Americans have turned a deaf ear to the desperate pleas of Syrian refugees because they are half a world away, their culture is so different, and there might be terrorists among them. It’s easy to leave it to the neighboring countries – Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey – to save them. But, those countries have already been flooded with Syrian refugees. Neighboring Lebanon, which is only two-thirds the size of Connecticut, has absorbed one million Syrians; more than 600,000 have escaped into Jordan which is smaller than Indiana and mostly desert; nearly three million have poured into Turkey.

Germany has agreed to take in one million Syrian refugees. Despite the fact that many of us like to think of ourselves as a generous Christian nation, the United States has agreed to take in a paltry 10,000. To date, we have received only 1,300. This may be one more sign of the declining influence of the Christian Church in the United States. Although I’m reminded that during World War II, our country also restricted the number of Jews allowed to enter our country fleeing the Nazis.

Today’s Scripture reading is likely the most well-known parable of Jesus. Even people who are not Christian know that followers of Jesus are supposed to be “Good Samaritans.” You know the story. An expert in the law of Moses asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds, “What is written in the law?” The lawyer says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus congratulates him. “You have nailed it; do this, and you will live.” That could have ended the exchange; however the lawyer poses one more question: “Who is my neighbor?”

Why did the lawyer ask that question? Do you suppose it was because he is looking for a loophole? We do not know, because Jesus disarmed the man with his answer. He did not provide a legal definition or a quote from Scripture. Instead, Jesus told a story about a man who was beaten by robbers and nearly killed. The story has some plausibility because that dry and rocky stretch of road between Jerusalem and Jericho was known to be

dangerous. “Now by chance,” Jesus says, “a priest was going down that road.” Great! – the lawyer is thinking – the priest will help the man. But, Jesus says, that “when the priest saw (the man in the ditch) he passed by on the other side.” Another man, a devout Temple assistant, followed suit.

A third man, a Samaritan, was also traveling the same road, and when he saw the man who had been badly beaten, something stirred within his heart and it motivated him to respond with compassion. It must have been a powerful surge of God’s Spirit, because there had been bad blood between Jews and Samaritans for centuries. Jews viewed Samaritans as social outcasts and religious heretics. Yet the Samaritan is the one who stops, bandages the man, and puts him on his own animal so that he can take him to an inn where he can recuperate. The next morning, when the Samaritan must continue his travels, he gives the innkeeper money to care for the man and says he will cover any other expenses he incurs nursing him back to health.

Jesus concludes with a question: “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The answer is obvious and the lawyer says, “The one who showed mercy.” “Go and do likewise,” Jesus responded. “Go and do likewise.” Jesus asks the lawyer to grasp a new understanding of “Who is my neighbor?” He blows apart the tightly constructed boundaries of their culture. Jesus says, “It’s not simply the guy who lives next door. It’s not just your extended family. It’s not just the folks who worship like we do, who look like we do, who talk like we do.

The story calls us to move beyond our comfort and abundance into the risky world of need – to venture out of our safe neighborhoods and help people who are in crisis. The story beckons us not simply to feel compassionate but to do something compassionate. More than a century ago, Dr. David Livingston said: “Sympathy is no substitute for action.” It is not enough to care about the pressing needs in our world, God wants us to do whatever we can to alleviate them. These days, many people of faith have become timid. Their faith means little more than believing certain doctrines about God and Jesus. They fail to live the compassionate and courageous lives God calls us to live. They have forgotten our Scriptural mandates to love our neighbors, to care for the vulnerable, and to welcome strangers. In Matthew 25, where Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, he says that those who enter the kingdom of heaven are those who respond to human need. Jesus says, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, *I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*”

Most Syrian refugees have lost all of their possessions except what they can carry in a suitcase or a plastic bag. It saddens me when people want to turn this into a Republican or Democratic issue. Our religious faith – not some political ideology – compels us to provide help to refugees fleeing war. One of the chief objections to receiving refugees from a country in the Middle East is that terrorists will sneak into our country along with legitimate refugees. Of course, we cannot be haphazard about welcoming everyone to our shores. There are people who want to do us harm. However, I pray that we not become so callous that we refuse to welcome people who are fleeing for their lives. We must balance compassion for innocents fleeing war with safety and security.

Last November, following the terrorist attacks in Paris, a number of politicians came out publicly against allowing Syrian refugees into our country because four of the terrorists involved in the attack had entered Europe as refugees through Greece. However, that fails to take into consideration the enormous differences between Greece’s refugee screening process and the process for allowing refugees into the United States. Greece was overwhelmed by a massive flow of Syrian refugees. Prior to the Paris attack, Greece interviewed only 20% of them. Four out of every five refugees who entered Greece from Syria were given a free pass. It is hardly any wonder that ISIS saw that as the perfect opportunity to funnel terrorists into Europe.

The United States has an entirely different system for screening refugees. “Refugees are subject to the highest level of security checks of any category of traveler to the United States.”<sup>1</sup> First, a person must apply for refugee status with the United Nation Refugee Agency. He/she undergoes a screening process which includes fingerprinting and iris scans. Iris scans detect the unique features of a person’s eyes and uses a specialized

computer program that can compare millions of images per second. The process includes questioning by a United Nations case worker who is an expert in the person's country-of-origin. They know particular regions of countries and local customs. Verification of people's identities and stories can take from two months to a few years.

Devon Cone interviews Syrian refugees for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He gives an example of the type of questions he asks: "When did you actually leave Syria? How did you leave Syria? Were you ever involved in any violence? Have you ever had communication with anyone who has used violence even in defensive means? Have you ever registered for any political party? Have you ever been involved in military service? Have you ever returned to Syria? What did you do for employment? What was your schooling like? What is your mother's name? What is your father's name? What is each of your brothers' and sisters' names?" And so on. This is only a small piece of what is asked during initial United Nations interviews and each of these questions is followed up by dozens of ensuing questions.<sup>4</sup>

The interviews last for hours and are scrutinized for any discrepancies. The information a person provides is compared with information from reputable sources about the person's particular region. This is an early step in a complex process that includes multiple interviews, dozens of reviews, and numerous security checks. If the person seeking refugee status is approved by the U.N. Refugee Agency, the U.N. sends a referral to a resettlement country government along with all of the information that has been collected. Further, it is the U.N. agency, *not the refugee*, that determines the country to which the refugee will be sent. If a person is recommended to be resettled in the United States, then the U.S. State Department's Resettlement program picks up the case. It runs the person's information through several databases including the Department of Homeland Security, the National Counterterrorism Center, the F.B.I. and the Department of Defense. Jana Mason, a senior adviser to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says, "Of all the categories of persons entering the U.S., Syrian refugees are the single most heavily screened and vetted."<sup>3</sup> If there are any doubts about someone, he/she is not allowed to enter the U.S.

How effective is this process? In the 15 years since the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack, the United States has admitted 784,000 refugees. None of them has carried out an act of terrorism. "Five have been arrested on terrorism-related charges: One was a man from Uzbekistan; the other four were from Iraq."<sup>2</sup> Another objection some raise is why help foreigners when there are plenty of people here at home needing help. Jesus never said it was either/or. It is both/and! Most of our mission dollars are spent locally, but 30% goes to our neighbors who live further away. We have an amazing family of faith and we know how to be a neighbor. We know how to bandage wounds; we know how to feed hungry people; we know how to provide shelter; we know how to welcome strangers. I know of no congregation that responds to local needs in as many ways as our community of faith.

For years, we have partnered with Habitat for Humanity to build houses for first-time home buyers. Yesterday was the third time we contributed \$50,000 for the privilege of starting the construction of houses on our front lawn. More than 130 of us participated. We know how to be a neighbor. Four weeks a year we house families who are temporarily homeless due to loss of employment, serious illness or the like. During each of these weeks, 30 – 40 of our members make it happen. We know how to be a neighbor.

In 1990, we partnered with *Friendship House* to create *Burton House*, one of the first transitional housing programs in New Castle County. It continues to help men today. Our *New Life Furnishings* ministry provides furniture for people who are in urgent need of furnishings such as beds, tables, lamps and so on. We know how to be a neighbor. A large percentage of the homeless population in our area are people who have mental illness or have drug/alcohol addictions. We help this population by providing meeting space and through our financial support of Friendship House. Seven different addiction groups – both *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Narcotics Anonymous* – meet in our downstairs "Club Room." Each of these weekly meetings average 25 – 40 people. We know how to be a neighbor.

Much of our help for people who are poor comes in the form of food ministries. We provide both financial support and members who serve meals at *Saturday Breakfast Club*, *Sunday Morning Breakfast* and *Emmanuel Dining Room*. We know how to be a neighbor. On winter nights when the chill factor drops below a certain point, we provide hot soup, sandwiches, and our members to serve meals so the “hard core” homeless can find shelter from the cold. We know how to be a neighbor. Is there a risk that someone who has mental illness or who is addicted to drugs might harm a volunteer? It is possible. But should that threat stop us from extending a helping hand? Do we allow fear to be our chief motivation?

Part of the point Jesus makes with his parable, is that the Good Samaritan was taking a risk when he helped the man in the ditch who appeared to be hurt. We must take reasonable precautions, but we cannot refuse help whenever there is a risk. We provide financial support, meeting space and tutors for *Urban Promise*. This after-school ministry to 40 very low income children provides tutoring help, life skills training, and Christian values. We know how to be a neighbor.

In addition to feeding, housing, and tutoring ministries we also have members who drive people without transportation to doctor’s appointments. We know how to be a neighbor.

Our members feel God calling them to a number of different ministries. I thank God for each one of you and for the privilege of serving such a committed community of faith.

Now, some of our members feel called to help refugees fleeing war – some of the most desperate people on our planet. This is a vital ministry we can provide. Is there a risk that a terrorist might slip through the refugee resettlement program? It is possible. However, given the vetting process, it’s highly unlikely that a terrorist would enter our country through legal channels. Men, women and children who have had to flee their country in order to survive need compassionate and courageous souls to help them start a new life. The children need the opportunity for an education. We can help because we know how to be a neighbor.

For the past three years, our Church in the World Mission Committee has provided financial support for Syrian refugees. We purchased shoes for children who were barefooted, we sent money for food and stoves, and we support schools in refugee camps. A few weeks ago our Session voted to endorse the refugee initiative of the Presbyterian Church (USA) called “We Choose Welcome” which advocates welcoming fully vetted refugees from Syria to come to the U.S.

This coming Friday, you are invited to Rodney Chapel to hear the Reverend Elmarie Parker, the Presbyterian Church (USA) liaison to Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Then, next Sunday morning at 9:00 a.m. you can attend a Q and A about the “We Choose Welcome” program. Following next Sunday’s 10:00 a.m. worship service, everyone who supports welcoming Syrian refugees will be invited to come up to the chancel for a group photo with our “We Choose Welcome” banner. Each person needs to make the decision for himself/herself.

Sometimes the words of Jesus are warm and comforting. Other times they get under our skin. Jesus asked the lawyer: “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The man said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.”

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Infographic: The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>. 2. Eliza Griswoldjan, “Why Is It So Difficult for Syrian Refugees to Get Into the U.S.?” January 20, 2016. 3. Alex Altman, “This I How the Syrian Refugee Screening Process Works,” *Time*, November 17, 2015. 4. Devone Cone, “The Process for Interviewing, Vetting, and Resettling Syrian Refugees in America Is Incredibly Long and Thorough: I should know — I’ve been doing it,” *Foreign Policy*, November 30, 2015. Here is the United States Government website that explains the screening process for refugee entry into the United States: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>

## The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

In the beginning you looked upon chaos and saw what could be. You saw light that could pierce darkness, and land that could yield fruit. You saw a home for us, and you spoke that home into being. With your Word, you formed life from the dust of the earth. And when the work was finished, you looked upon creation and declared it 'good.' You called us to a life as beautiful as everything you had made. But we turned away from you. Always faithful, you did not give up on your people. You gave us your law – teaching us to love you with heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we neglected to do justice and love kindness, you called to us through the voices of prophets and beckoned us back to you. In the fullness of time, you sent your Son to show us the way. Jesus brought good news to the poor and proclaimed release to the captives; he healed the sick and let *the oppressed go free/strengthened the fainthearted*. A friend of sinners, an advocate for the lowly, Jesus showed us how to love you and one another. Faithful to your mission, he went to the cross, died, and rose again, that we might have life and have it abundantly. Through Christ, we have a place prepared for us at this table, where you receive us with open arms. So we come with a hunger that bread alone cannot fill. As we gather around this table, send your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts of bread and cup, that this meal may unite us with Christ and with all who share this feast.

Holy God, We cannot share this bread, and forget those who are hungry; We cannot delight in this homecoming, and forget those without homes; We cannot gather around the family table, and forget the divisions that plague us; We cannot glimpse your kingdom, and forget the brokenness of our world. We lift before you those whose hands are empty, and whose hearts are full of grief ... those whose lives and communities have been shattered by violence ... those who live each day in fear. And we give thanks for neighbors near and far who work for peace, who inspire hope, and who bear witness to your love and grace, even in the most desperate places.

As we come to this table – a table that is big enough for all – we pray that you would strengthen us for your work. So fill us with your grace that it overflows from us through acts of service. And send us out from this table, to love as Christ loved.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who gave us words to pray: **Our Father ...**